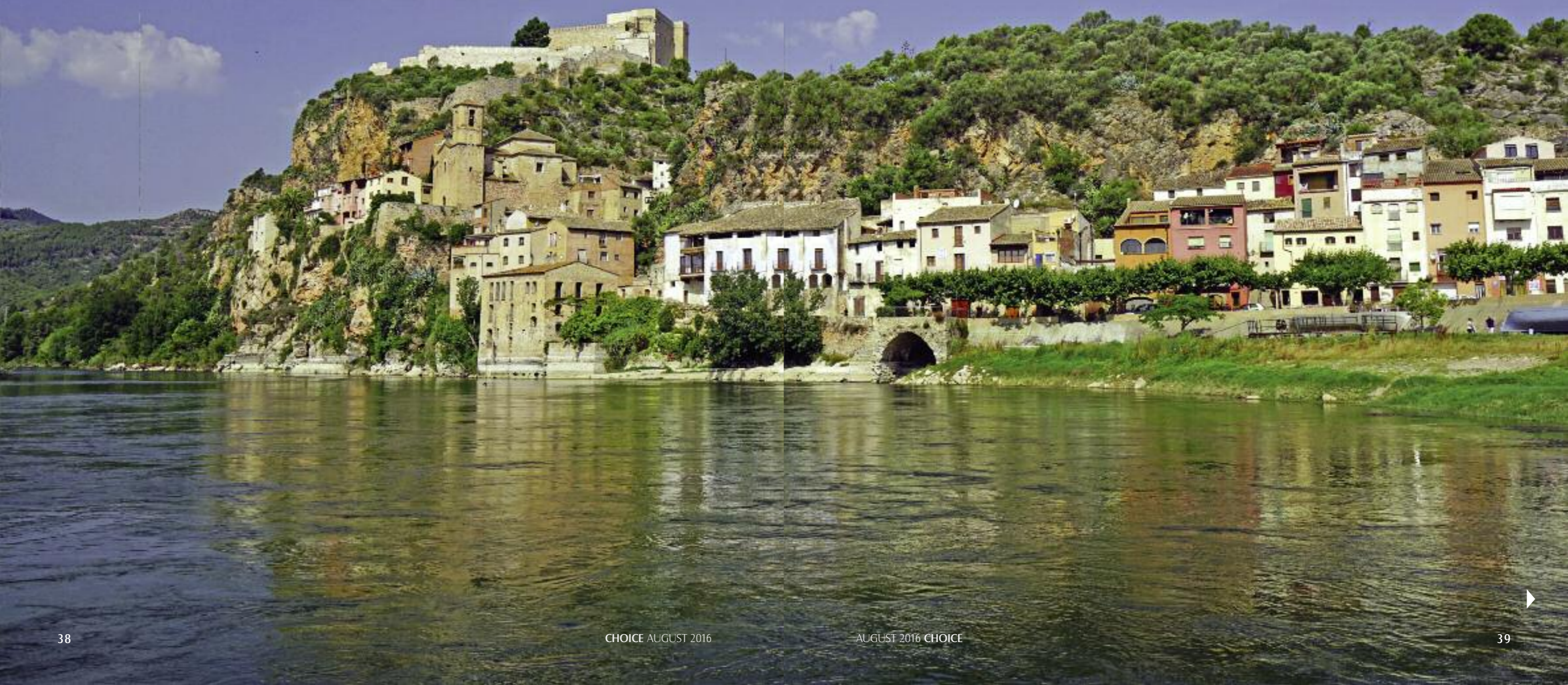


Homage to *Catalonia*

Clive Nicholls takes to two wheels to explore the many hidden treasures of southern Catalonia

PICTURES: CLIVE NICHOLLS

Magical Miravet sits on the banks of the mighty Ebro River. The Templar Castle is in a commanding position at the top of the cliff



SITTING HIGH above the mighty Ebro River, the village of Miravet clings to the rock face like a barnacle to a boat hull.

Swallows swoop low over the water as they feed in flight while a heron looks to have fallen asleep as he waits for the river to deliver his lunch. The grand Templar Castle looks down on this sleepy yet hauntingly beautiful village in this largely undiscovered region in southern Catalonia.

I reflect on my cycling holiday that started at the Ebro Delta and followed the river upstream to magical Miravet.

In just a few days I've seen the terrain change from the delta swamps to the surrounding mountains here at Miravet. I've eaten wonderful seafood, drunk some excellent Spanish wine, toured historic cities and, with the cycling, stayed reasonably fit in the process.

The Ebro delta is just two hours drive (or a faster train journey) from the airport at Barcelona. Yet the transformation from big city hustle and bustle to being at one with nature is dramatic.

Flamingos wade the shallows, flooded rice fields and salt pans draw on the goodness of the Ebro and in the warm waters of the estuary mussels and oysters are grown and harvested.

The tourist attraction Mon Natura Delta de L'Ebre gives a good insight to life in the Delta.

There's a full-scale recreation of the salt pans, demonstrations of fishing techniques and a viewing platform to take in the birdlife of this special area.

I'm staying overnight in the Delta at the Hotel l'Algadir and the chef, Joan Capilla, invites me into the kitchen as he rustles up local dishes for tonight's dinner.

It's a family hotel and Joan is proud of his cuisine and I tasted samples as he cooked. I wasn't too keen on the eels but the paella was something special – highly recommended!

Time to pick up my bike in L'Ampolla. I get a puncture repair guide from Fiona, the Headwater (my tour operator) rep, pick up my maps, then hit the road, or in my case, track, for all my routes are on



Main picture: Miravet, a haven for artists
Below left to right: My trusty steed, the Headwater bike performed faultlessly;
Chef Joan Capilla gives a cookery demonstration in the kitchen of the Hotel L'Algadir; Picasso's flat in Horta and mussels growing in the Ebro Delta





◀ cycle ways and I don't have to mix it with the traffic.

The Delta area is absolutely flat, so this is easy cycling – along the promenade, then on to the sandy, off-road route.

Stop off at the bird hides, watch the grebes working the reed beds then take a boat ride out to the mussel beds.

Ruben at the helm tells me that each year the Ebro Delta provides 5000 tonnes of mussels and 2000-plus of oysters. Inspecting the beds by boat is good but it gets better as we pull up alongside an offshore cabin on stilts offering the very best in refreshments: fresh oysters and mussels served up with sliced lemons and sparkling white wine.

I was always nervous about oysters but I have to confess it's easy to get a taste for them, and I have. This is a real treat and is a definite recommendation if you visit the area. Back to the bike and off to



Clockwise: Spanish paella, what a treat; cycling on the seafront at L'Ampolla; cloisters at the Tortosa Cathedral; the magnificent view from Horta de Sant Joan; Aurelio, Patron of the Arts in Miravet; Tortosa Cathedral Museum; Fiona gives me a puncture repair demonstration (not needed); traditional boats at the Delta Saltworks

Tortosa, an ancient city on the banks of the Ebro. Construction of the cathedral here was started in 1347 but took several hundred years to complete.

It's still dramatic, and the monastery is now a museum while the underground chambers that served as a bomb shelter in the Spanish Civil War are open to the public.

It's well worth a visit; the historic artefacts and the carved wooden stalls from the monastery ooze history and the cathedral itself is a place for quiet reflection.

Headwater are moving my luggage, so it's an easy ride to my overnight at the Hotel Parador de Tortosa.

In the morning the view from my room is amazing. The early morning sun casts shadows across the city and highlights the Franco monument set in the middle of the Ebro.

In 2010 a vote to remove the monument (built in 1966 to honour the Nationalists who died in the Battle of



the Ebro) was defeated and it is still standing. Today's ride is gentle. I'm following the Via Verde (green-way) towards Pinell de Brai. The route is on a disused railway line that has been surfaced so it's perfect for cyclists and walkers.

One surprise though... this track takes me through several tunnels, most of which have lights, but it's a good thing that I've been provided with a head torch as some of the longer ones can get pretty dark in the middle. It all adds to the fun though.

With the Ebro on my right-hand side I pass through Xerta, stopping to fill my water bottle at the disused railway station. I've seen a lot of these on my route, several have been converted to bars, but it still seems strange leaning your bike against the platform as you hop up for a drink.

A couple of miles north of Xerta there's a massive dam on the Ebro that's used to divert water into irrigation canals to spread the goodness of the river to a wider area.

At Pinell de Brai, my last stop on the bike, there's a fabulous 'cathedral of wine', an Art Nouveau building that was the centre of wine production. Designed by architect Cèsar Martinell, a follower of Gaudi, construction was started in 1918 and took almost ten years to complete. The roof structure is particularly impressive.

Wine is still produced here but there's also a restaurant, wine tours and tastings. It's the perfect place for a long, leisurely



◀ lunch – I couldn't resist it! When the waitress introduces the wine that she is serving with the words "this is the best wine we produce here" you know it's going to be a good lunch, and it was. Wonderful food, fine wine, no rush. Sitting outside soaking up the balmy Spanish weather: perfect.

After a long break it's onwards to Horta de Sant Joan, my overnight stop. Sitting on a hill, overlooked by Magic Mountain, it is a special place, so special that Pablo Picasso came here twice to stay and paint. He produced some of his early cubist works here and in the town's Picasso Museum you can see copies of pictures that were painted in the town square. Picasso

was liked by the locals as he bought money to the economy, but some of the local women, upset that he was living out of wedlock, did heckle the couple from the street below his flat. He soon sorted that out; he fired shots from a revolver on his balcony. They soon got the message that he'd had enough and calm was returned.

Picasso once said "everything I know. I learned in Horta". I think he was referring to his painting style and not how to handle a baying crowd.

The 1200 residents today rely on agriculture for their income. Olives, almonds and fruit together with sheep and goats are the mainstay, but tourism is

Clockwise from top left: Aurelio's art centre in Miravet; the theological college in Tortosa; Tortosa sits on the banks of the Ebro; Josep Papaseit working as a potter in Miravet; the ladies play cards in Horta; La Via Verda runs for 49km from Tortosa to Arnes

now a bonus. However, I'll finish my story where I started, in magical Miravet. The castle, which was taken from the Moors by the Knights Templar in 1317, dominates the skyline but the little town has so much more to offer as my guide Aurelio Monge explains.

"This region has always been a haven for working artists; Joaquim Mir worked here and the tradition carries on."

Aurelio does his bit, too. He has an arts centre, where artists and musicians come to stay. He makes no charge for accommodation but in return the artist leaves a piece of work or the musicians put on a performance.

The old mosque is now a cultural

centre and there is still a thriving pottery community in the town; it's just one of those places where you feel you want to stay a while.

I've really enjoyed my cycling holiday. Headwater makes it straightforward, the routes are planned out, my luggage moved on – I just had to do the easy bit; pedal the bike.

This part of Catalonia isn't as well known as the region to the north of Barcelona but for me that makes it even more interesting. The cycle tracks were well maintained and underused. At times I felt I had the place to myself. A bit of exercise, good food and wine and warm Spanish sunshine: perfect.

Find out more

■ Headwater offer six, seven and eight night cycling holidays around Catalan's River Ebro. The six-night version departs every two days, April to October inclusive and costs from £837 (tour only)/ £859 (self drive in return Eurotunnel)/ £1019 (air rail including return BA flights from Heathrow to Barcelona and onward rail). Included are six nights' B&B hotel accommodation (mainly four-star hotels), three evening meals, high quality bike hire, detailed maps and meticulous cycling route notes, transport of bags between hotels, and 24/7 support from Headwater both in UK and overseas.

■ For bookings, e-mail (sales@headwater.com) or tel: 01606 822675, website: (www.headwater.com).